



Faith in Action

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by Steve Thorngate

The progressive Christian movement isn't simply the lefty counterpart to the higher-profile Christian right. So what exactly is it?

A pastor I know wears a T-shirt identifying him as a "proud member of the Christian left." I asked where he bought it. "It's hard to find a shirt like this," he replied. "I made it myself."

There were no such shirts for sale April 11-13 at the downtown Minneapolis Hyatt, but the place was crawling with liberal Christians. Five hundred people attended a conference on faith and politics, hosted by the Plymouth Center for Progressive Christian Faith, a project of Minneapolis' Plymouth Congregational Church. The weekend's three keynotes and several smaller sessions focused on the growing progressive alternative to the Christian right.

The vast majority of conference-goers were mainline Protestants, members of the historic denominations that now comprise the moderate-to-liberal sector of the U.S. church. It's a distinct group from evangelical Protestants, politically progressive or otherwise: Among other things, mainline Protestants read scripture more critically and are less likely to define their beliefs in opposition to other faiths or to the wider culture.

In other words, these Christians are relatively liberal in their theology as well as in their politics. Words such as "liberal" and "left," however, were in short supply—one of several ambiguities the weekend highlighted.

The Rev. Anne S. Howard directs the Beatitudes Society, which works with seminarians. In her session, Howard underscored the need to eschew political partisanship—a point echoed in the keynote by Jim Wallis, president of the social-activism organization Sojourners. (Full disclosure: I interned at *Sojourners* magazine.)

Afterwards, Howard explained to me that the reason to reject the left-right framework is that it's done little to advance the "social-justice agenda." Of course, this is the language of the left. But the point isn't just to dial down the rhetoric to better achieve lefty goals. Howard emphasized theological motivations, "loving our neighbors as ourselves and finding a way to express that in the body politic. That's different from lining up on either side of the aisle."

The Rev. Grant Abbott, director of the Saint Paul Area Council of Churches, agreed. He stressed to me the spiritual foundations of being "an advocate without becoming a crusader," of focusing on "healing, not winning." Others I talked to shared this commitment to something deeper and more relational than the neat trick of winning a political battle by denying its existence.

Some, however, betrayed an ambivalence about giving up on left vs. right. At Howard's session, seminarian Gage Church spoke in fairly partisan terms, arguing that "progressive Christians, or

whatever we were called before”—I inferred a nostalgia for that dirtiest of words, *liberal*—“need the network, numbers, and strength of community to match the right. If we go out and speak prophetically, are we going to be all alone? Will we be slapped down, like Jeremiah Wright?”

That’s an interesting reference in a room full of white folks. Yet in one sense, these are Wright’s people. One reason the public has struggled to understand the Chicago Congregationalist is that, unlike most pastors, he exists simultaneously in two distinct branches of Christianity—the historic black church and the Protestant mainline. The latter group is largely white, and at the conference I saw no more than 10 people of color, five of them scheduled speakers. People under age 40 were scarce as well.

But there was some diversity of *thought* present. At the weekend’s start, Plymouth Church pastor James Gertmenian summed up the conference as having “one cause: that the poor be given justice.” Several sessions focused on economic topics, and some participants I talked to worried that gender and sexuality issues—covered, but less extensively—might be lower priorities for the movement’s leadership. (Plymouth Church and Gertmenian themselves are outspoken pro-LGBT advocates.)

Still, there seemed to be broad agreement on overall goals. As mainline progressives, most also shared a disinclination to believe that Christians have special access to religious truth, as evidenced in the ways they talked about their faith and about working with others outside it. Many moved easily between specifically Christian points of reference and broader ones, using terms such as “Christians,” “people of faith,” and “spiritual people” interchangeably.

The conference also featured several non-Christian speakers, including Rabbi Or Rose of Hebrew College. “As a Jew,” Rose noted, “I can’t accept that Jesus is the incarnate God.”

“Some of us Christians don’t believe that, either,” a woman responded, to murmurs of agreement. It was a telling moment, as many Christians see this as the singularly defining element of the faith.

A Christianity this pluralistic is unlikely to alienate its allies. But is there anything distinct about it? The Christian right’s unique focus on personal piety and morality, narrowly defined, reshaped conservatism. But progressive Christians are broadly inclusive and care about the same political issues as other progressives. Their action alerts often read like MoveOn’s, but with scripture. Why should anyone care?

“They should care,” offered Anne Howard, “because we [progressives] need all the players we can get.” She added that Christian and secular progressives share goals but not necessarily motives: “A biblical basis is a different starting place than, say, the egalitarian principles of democracy.”

Responding by e-mail to the same question, the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s Institute for Welcoming Resources, underlined methodology: “Unlike organizing movements that sometimes emphasize more confrontational models, we encourage folks to emphasize listening and relationship-building... to focus on both the ends and the means.”

Voelkel, who led a session on LGBT inclusion in the church, also observed that “cultural transformation is deeper than public policy.... Because homophobia, heterosexism, and gender-phobia are so religiously rooted and sanctioned, working within religious institutions is critical.”

All this suggests that this strain of Christian political engagement is less a discrete interest group than one strategic front of progressivism broadly. Certainly, its motives and methods are unusual in the ways Howard and Voelkel described. But even these process-oriented concerns aren't necessarily *unique* to people of faith, and they didn't claim that they were.

In his keynote, Rabbi Michael Lerner—head of *Tikkun* and the Network of Spiritual Progressives—argued that the distinct contribution of “spiritual progressives” is an understanding that the fundamental human crisis is a spiritual one, that of self-centered individualism. Lerner acknowledged that this sounds a bit like Christian-right talk. But he suggested that, while there's plenty wrong with “the religious right's *analysis* of the problem, the spiritual crisis is not something they made up.”

Maybe not. But do you have to be religious to address it? The people at this conference wouldn't say so. What they would say is that the main responsibility of those who *are* Christians is not piety or ritual—it's action on behalf of others.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a favorite text among progressive Christians. A man is beaten and left for dead. Two religious leaders pass by before a Samaritan, a socioreligious outcast, stops to help. It's the Samaritan's actions, not his beliefs or identity, that matter.

I asked conference attendee Larry Peterson why he came. “To learn how I can live my faith,” he replied. Each session offered addressed this in some way: everything from an overall theological framework for social-justice activism, to tips for making a church building more welcoming to transgendered people, to an opportunity to intervene on behalf of six hotel cleaning staff who'd just been fired under suspicious circumstances.

Outside the Hyatt, I stepped into a coffee shop to escape the unseasonable cold. A woman stood inside, holding a garbage bag of belongings and greeting customers with cryptic outbursts. A barista brought her a muffin. “Stay as long as you want,” he said, “but I'd appreciate it if you tried not to yell at people.” Perhaps his hospitality was motivated by faith—I didn't think to ask. Neither did she; she just stood there, quietly keeping warm.